

## VetSuccess program comes to KCC

Jason Bushong said it can be difficult for a military veteran to adjust to civilian life. That's especially true, he said, if they're trying to go to college.

"It's a very different pace," said the 34-year-old Bellevue resident and former U.S. Army specialist taking criminal justice classes at Kellogg Community College. "Just being readjusted is the hardest part and taking that first step to go to school. Once you get started, it's easy, but doing that initial step is the hard part."

A veteran faces all the hurdles every other college student faces: the confusion of class schedules and finding books, managing financial aid. But for those who've served in the U.S. military, add to that the confusion of maneuvering for military benefits and the stress of leaving the ranks and figuring out how to live back home.

A new federal program coming to KCC, Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo Valley Community College is meant to help vets navigate that stress.

This summer, those schools will jointly host a VetSuccess on Campus site, one of only 12 such sites in the nation and the only Michigan site, according to a WMU news release last week. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs program makes available to military veterans a full-time VA

vocational counselor and a part-time outreach specialist.

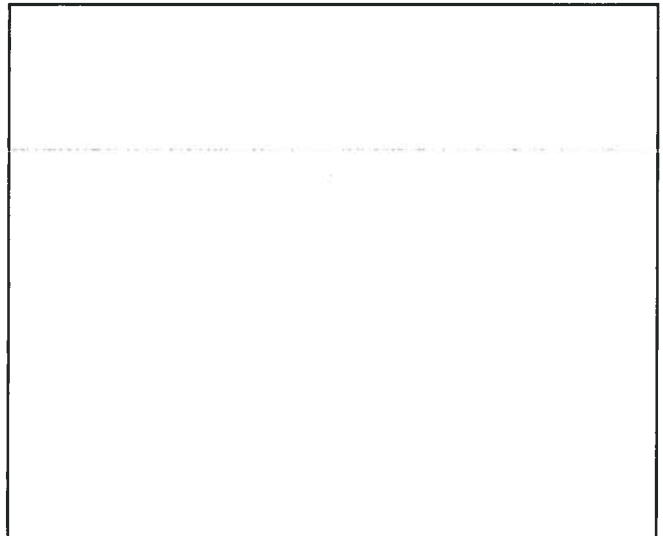
Working with existing advisers at the schools, those staffers help veterans access benefits and support services, vocational training and job services, disability compensation, life insurance, home loan guarantees and health care, the release said.

Bushong, who left the service last year and said he served in Iraq, said the program would help. He said the military goes over educational benefits quickly during troops' last days in the service and helping soldiers plan their post-service futures was important.

"You know that option (for college) is there, but there are certain things you have to get in line before you can even sign up," Bushong said. "Anything that can help guys get that done is a good thing."

"I think it's a good idea," said Steven Smith,

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a 25-year-old Battle Creek resident and U. S. Marine corporal now taking law enforcement classes at KCC.

"When I first got in school, I didn't know what I was doing," said the veteran of the Afghanistan war who said he left the military in December. "I pretty much had to bother a lot of people; I was always in and out of the academic advisers' office. It would have been better if I had someone there to help me all the time."

"It's really wonderful that we can provide this benefit," said KCC President Dennis Bona. "It really speaks to the collaboration of all three colleges and our legislators that helped bring that in our direction."

According to the WMU news release, U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, worked with the VA to bring the program here. Bona said the VetSuccess office would be operational at KCC in September, delayed because of construction there. But Bona said the services would be available sooner.

The schools were chosen after being named "military-friendly schools" by G.I. Jobs Magazine, and WMU was among the top 50 "Best for Vets" schools named in the Military Times' Edge Magazine. The three schools collectively serve about 1,000 veterans, the news release said, and Bona said about 100 of those were at KCC.

Bona said KCC has long focused on helping veterans, but the new program would further that mission.

"It's not an easy transition for those folks," Bona said. "We owe them so much. They've sacrificed so much for us and I look at this as paying some of that back."

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